

LOTHROP (THOS.)

AN ADDRESS

DELIVERED BEFORE THE BUFFALO TEACHERS' INSTITUTE,

SATURDAY, JAN. 6, 1872,

BY THOS. LOTHROP, M. D.,

SUPERINTENDENT OF EDUCATION,

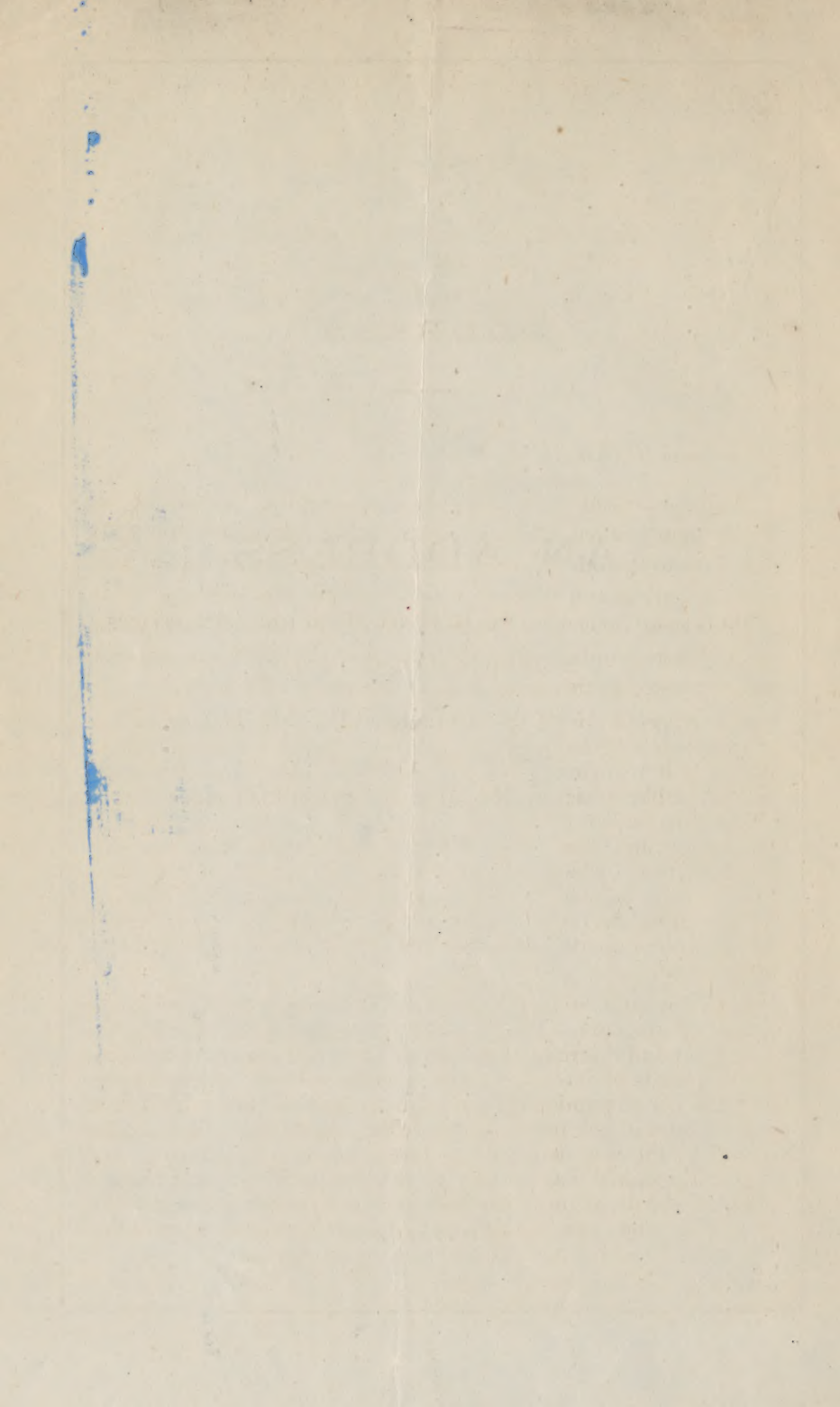
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ADDRESS.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

With the present week I have entered upon that portion of my official term granted by the grace of the last Legislature to myself, as well as to the other officers of our municipal government, and the occasion seems not inopportune to speak a few words of truth and soberness concerning the work which has been performed, and the results accomplished during the period the public schools have been entrusted to the supervision of the present incumbent.

A retrospective view of experiences in any department of life often affords an interesting and profitable theme for consideration, especially if it reviews official conduct which has elicited individual and public criticism, such as my administration of the public schools has called forth. Such a subject is fruitful of practical suggestions, and offers an opportunity long desired to break the "dignified silence" which self-respect and the dignity of my office have hitherto enjoined, and to unfold the thoughts and motives, the principles and opinions, by which I have been governed in directing the important interests which the people elected me to superintend.

It is not strange in inaugurating the work of reform in our system of education—a work plainly needed and demanded by the intelligent and discriminating sentiment of the community—that the thousands of interests centering in the schools, and extending from teacher to pupil and from pupil to patron, until the homes and firesides of the people were reached, should have been so disturbed by the new dispensation, that a storm of opposition and contumely should have arisen in the previously quiescent atmosphere of the department, threatening to overpower an inexperienced official who was striving with honest purpose to introduce

method, and system, and unity of action in place of the entire absence of these essential elements everywhere prevalent. The comparison may seem far-fetched, but does not the organized system of extravagance and waste of the corrupt ring, lately brought to light in the municipal affairs of the metropolis, bear a resemblance, though in a faint degree, to the manner in which our free schools were conducted in many instances? Our neighbors suffered from a waste of their treasure, from a system of robbery and corruption in every department of their government, which surpasses any scheme of rascality heretofore exposed in our political history. We have suffered from a waste of our educational forces, from a want of organization in all the departments of our schools, and a consequent waste of the time of our pupils, through the absence of the most approved methods in directing their education. Ours was a "Tammany," not of corrupt politicians stealing the people's money, but of inefficient schoolmasters, trifling with the most sacred interests, which the nature of our institutions has warned the American people to carefully foster.

Looking at these matters from a business standpoint, it is reasonable to assume that a department, for the support of which more than a fourth of the money raised annually in this city by taxation is devoted, should be conducted, in order to yield profitable returns, upon the most rigid and systematic principles. The maintenance of the public schools of Buffalo costs more than a quarter of a million dollars per year. I think I do not mistake the sentiment of the people, when I affirm that this enormous expense is willingly borne if results are obtained proportionate to the sacrifices made on their part to maintain them. The people want to see good honest work. They have long ago been surfeited with gasconade almost beyond the endurance of a sensible and intelligent community.

I have expressed upon another occasion my conviction that the success of any educational system depends mainly upon the character and ability of the teacher, "Such as the schoolmaster is, such is the school," is a trite saying, containing too much of truth and practical good sense to be easily controverted. The school bears the impress of the teacher's ability, culture and tact. If endowed with superior intellectual gifts, the pupils in all the departments feel the influence emanating from this higher source. The master-mind, like the master-mechanic, brings forth finished work, adorned and beautified with the finer touches, which only the skilled mind or skilled hand can produce. Can it be said that we have always employed in our public schools such an array of tal-

ent as a city of the wealth and population of Buffalo should command? Is there a system of free schools in any other city of equal size on the continent which could not point to a single classical scholar at the head of any of its graded schools? But my surprise would stop at this statement of facts, strange as they may seem to an educated mind, if, to cap the climax, the opinion had not prevailed among some of my predecessors that teachers who had received the highest intellectual culture which the leading universities and colleges of our country could impart, and whose scholarship was the source of pride and remark in educated circles, could not succeed at the head of any of our grammar schools. Can we wonder that our public schools have failed to command the respect which the large outlay of the people's money would lead us to expect when a class of men found employment therein so well known in other localities as not to be wanted, and so well known, even in our midst, as to fail to secure the support and confidence of the community? By my official acts the people have been informed, from time to time, that I was dissatisfied with the ability and character of some of the teachers previously employed in this department; and whenever convinced that the public interests would be subserved by a change, I have not hesitated to take the full responsibility—not suffering the interests of the individual to interfere with the important trusts committed to my supervision. There has been an honest difference of opinion in regard to the correctness of my judgment in many of these changes, but if the facts that were in my possession were not sufficient to justify the course pursued, the events which have subsequently transpired have more than demonstrated the necessity of the step. I hope the time has passed forever when money rather than merit, political influence rather than eminent fitness, are the successful means to employ to secure an appointment in the public schools of Buffalo. But if my opinions were based upon the ability and education of some whose removal I have felt it a solemn duty to make, I should not hesitate to affirm that private ends rather than the public good had been subserved by such appointments. Will you pardon the plain talk which the public criticisms of my official course, by aggrieved parties, seems to render necessary upon this occasion, when I state an honest conviction, that this department can well afford to secure a perpetual riddance of teachers, one of whom has never been long wanted in any position he has before or subsequently filled; of another whose success in raising funds from his pupils for the benefit of his school was only surpassed by the adroitness with which he diverted a considerable percentage to his private purse; of another whose absolute unfitness by nature and education for any position which

he was called upon to fill was manifest to both patrons and pupils in every district in which he taught, but not to the Superintendents who preceded me in this office; of another, who made to me false returns of the work he was called upon to perform; and the category might be extended, but I forbear, not doubting that these and other facts in my possession will fully explain that the Augean stables required cleaning out, and that the people have not been disappointed in the capacity of the present Superintendent to do that kind of work.

Having, therefore, carefully examined the qualifications and ability of teachers, it followed as a natural consequence that my attention should be directed to the system or method in which the work assigned them was performed, and it required but a brief period to ascertain that no system had ever been adopted whereby either teacher or pupil was held to any accountability for the amount or accuracy of his work. The Graded Course of Instruction, patterned after the graded course in the Chicago schools, had been previously adopted, but no system of reviews or examinations whereby the proficiency of both teacher and pupil could be tested, had ever been authorized by the Superintendent. The failure to adopt these means made the grades in the different schools as diversified as the schools themselves, and deprived the graded course of uniformity, which is one of its most essential features, and almost counteracted the beneficial influences expected from its adoption. I will not here discuss the faults of the graded course of instruction, nor the palpable defects already developed in that now in use in our schools. It cannot be expected that the curriculum should be faultless, or the manner in which it is carried out absolutely perfect or uniform, but we can approximate to correct results only by careful labor. It is my purpose to invite suggestions from the teachers and endeavor to modify the amount and character of the work required of the pupils, in order that it may be more nearly adapted to their capacity and wants.

The system of reviews and examinations seems, in my judgment, wise and judicious. Their object is simply to test the thoroughness and accuracy of the work performed by both teacher and pupil. This plan has been in successful operation in Cleveland, Chicago, and other cities, with such results as to meet the approval of the authorities by whom they were instituted. I know of no other method by which the responsibility can be placed where it properly belongs, and both teacher and pupil be made to

feel that there is a rule by which their work is measured, and that the required standard of proficiency must be attained to satisfy the authority over them. It has been objected to the plan of thorough examinations that it imposes increased labor upon the teachers, and thus burdens them with an amount of work to which heretofore they had been unaccustomed. In reply to these objections, permit me to say that your own convenience has not been consulted in the least in enforcing these rules, but, instead, the good of the department. If it is your desire to pass away the time required by ordinance for your presence at your respective school-rooms with the least possible effort on your part, it should be your aim not to favor the prolonged continuance of the present Superintendent in the position he now occupies. I believe the city pays you for *work* and not for *play*; and it expends its quarter of a million dollars annually not to support you in idleness, nor to give you positions of ease and comfort, but rather that the youth of our city may grow to manhood and womanhood with minds well stored with useful knowledge, and thoroughly disciplined for the stern realities of their maturer years. I cannot conceive how these results can be accomplished without the most earnest and conscientious devotion of your time, energies and abilities to your responsible vocation.

But it has been said that the system of examinations and reviews induces to a habit of "cramming," which is prejudicial to the health of the pupils. It occurs to me to suggest that such an idea must rather have originated in the mind of some teacher who was more solicitous of his own personal comfort, or afraid to submit his labors to the critical inspection of others, lest he should be regarded an unprofitable servant and dismissed from the service—than from any anxiety for the sanitary condition of his pupils. If I have no greater sin for which to answer at the judgment day than that my position has been used to overburden the tender organizations of the young, during their pupilage, with tasks unsuited to their years and strength, my condemnation may be as tolerable as the reward of those who ring the alarm of "cramming" when there is real work to do, and yearn for the old *regime* when compelled to return an equivalent for the salary they annually received from the pockets of the people.

There remains, however, a work of reform which long ago should have been instituted, whereby the schools would be rendered more efficient and the expense of maintaining them materially diminished. I refer to the consolidation of districts and the higher

grades, and the employment of a less number of teachers. The present system of supporting a full-graded school in each district was adopted in the earlier history of our city, and could hardly have anticipated its subsequent growth in wealth and population. It compels the city to employ 350 teachers to do the work which 300 could easily perform under a different system. It gives employment to twenty-four male principals, on a starvation salary, when it ought to employ only ten at a salary which would enable them to lay up a moderate competency for their declining years. In fact, the system is neither wise nor judicious, nor is it adapted to the growing wants of our prosperous city. Under our present organization the expense of our schools will increase disproportionately to the increase of the number of pupils. How far this increase may extend, may well be a subject of serious inquiry among the friends of popular education. The burden of taxation—already onerous—may excite the people to a curtailment of our educational privileges, and thus deprive us of the inestimable benefits which they now bestow. This work of reform will soon become an absolute necessity. Would it not be well for the teachers to take hold of this matter and demonstrate, both by precept and example, their earnestness in placing the public schools upon a more systematic and economical basis?

During my term of office there is no act to which I refer with so much pleasure and satisfaction as to the organization of the system of evening schools, which, through the earnest labors of the teachers employed, have deservedly merited the confidence and patronage of the public. If we were skeptical as to the propriety of such an investment on the part of the city, a single glance into one of the schools in which these earnest young men and women are laboring to supply the deficiency in their education, which their pecuniary circumstances or early indifference has produced, would not fail to dispel all doubt as to the influence of these schools upon the habits and character of the pupils in attendance. To the devoted labors of the teachers, who, at an inadequate compensation, have added this to their already over-tasked strength, I attribute the success which has attended the evening schools. I hope that at an early day an evening high school will be instituted, in which the ancient and modern languages, the natural sciences, the higher mathematics and industrial and mechanical drawing will be taught to the young men and women of

our city, to whom it is the duty of the municipal authorities to grant every facility for their intellectual and moral improvement.

The future of our schools is not without its dangers and its uncertainties, but the principle of extending the privileges of a complete education to the masses of the people without cost, has become so prominently a cardinal virtue of all political organizations, that there is much reason to hope that our citizens will not hesitate in the duty due to the well-being of society at large, in fostering their common schools and guarding them from the corrupting influences now so prevalent in almost every department of life. The advocates of the principles upon which free institutions are founded may well look to our schools for the strength and support necessary to ward off the dark and threatening clouds ecclesiastical prejudice on the one hand, and of political corruption on the other; and if the horizon of the future gives promise of brighter days for the oppressed and downtrodden of our own as well as of other lands, it arises—with the blessing of Heaven—from the diffusion of practical knowledge among the masses of the people.

Upon you, therefore, as laborers in this portion of the educational vineyard, rests the responsibility, for which heaven will call you to answer, that the system through which the rising generation is trained for the actual realities of life should be carefully guarded from enemies without and from deficiencies within. To me the department over which, by the suffrages of the people, I have been called to preside, will ever be an object of especial interest. I know the value of your services and the extent of your labors. No school system can boast of more faithful and conscientious teachers than are employed in our schools. For strict fidelity in the discharge of your duties, you have honored yourselves while bestowing upon others the benefit of the talents and education you have consecrated to your noble profession. The cordial co-operation and assistance rendered me in enforcing the strict and oftentimes rigid rules and regulations it has been my duty to lay down, I shall always appreciate as magnanimous upon your part; while your cheerful acquiescence in complying with my wishes has convinced me that faithful teachers will always sacrifice their own comfort for the good of the schools.

I hope that very soon the same authority which has extended my term of office beyond the period for which the people elected me, will provide for a successor, and in anticipating the relief from

official care and responsibility, which there is now reason to expect will very soon be afforded me, I can but trust that the administration of the important interests connected with our public schools will fall upon those who will carry forward the work of practical reform, and render the people a greater return for their annual outlay than I have been able to do.

Such being my earnest wish, may I implore the continued blessing of heaven upon the public schools of Buffalo, and its corps of faithful and devoted teachers.

